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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV. HQ US PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO). SEOUL
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER TH NRC

SUBJECT: THAILAND: STAFFDEL JANUZZI VISIT TO FAR SOUTH

REF: A. BANGKOK 2255

1B. BANGKOK 1008
1C. 04 BANGKOK 8377
1D. 04 BANGKOK 7171
1E. 04 BANGKOK 6647

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert J. Clarke. Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On March 28-29, Senate Foreign Relations Committee professional staff member Frank Januzzi visited Thailand's southernmost Muslim majority provinces. Januzzi spoke with a variety of interlocutors and heard local views on the origins and nature of the continuing unrest, cautious assessments about the prospects for success of the newly appointed National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), concerns about the deteriorating relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities, and local assessments that offers of U.S. assistance could be counterproductive. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) On March 28-29 Senate Foreign Relations Committee professional staff member Frank Januzzi visited Thailand's far southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Songkhla as part of an effort to understand the ongoing violence in the region. Januzzi met with several local journalists, leaders of the Narathiwat Islamic Committee (NIC), Muslim academics from Prince of Songkhla University - Pattani and the Pattani Vice Governor for Security. Embassy Bangkok Poloff accompanied Januzzi on his visit.

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT VIOLENCE - WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

¶3. (C) Many of Januzzi's interlocutors pointed out the importance of keeping the violence in southern Thailand in context because, as members of the Narathiwat Islamic Committee (NIC) emphasized, separatist related violence has been occurring in southern Thailand for over 100 years. At Prince of Songkhla University (PSU) Dr. Ibrahim Narongraksaket, the head of the Islamic Affairs Division, said he is greatly concerned about the current level of violence. He emphasized, however, that some level of violence is inevitable in southern Thailand given the historical and ethnic realities of the region. Pattani based journalist Paret Lohansen agreed that while there is a current upsurge of violence, it is important to bear in mind that conflict between local ethnically Malay-Thais and the central Thai government has been going on in the South for several generations.

WHY HAS THE VIOLENCE INCREASED IN THE SOUTH?

¶4. (C) The Deputy Chairmen of the NIC told Jannuzzi that they believe that the recent cycle of violence in the south originated with Prime Minister Thaksin's anti-narcotics campaign in early 2003. They said that locals seeking revenge for extra-judicial killings and arbitrary arrests by police entered into a cycle of violence. They say the cycle of revenge and government retribution was reinforced after the mass arrests of local Muslims following the armory raid in January, 2004 and the Tak Bai incident in October, 2004, in which 78 Muslim detainees died from suffocation while being transported to an Army camp. They believe this cycle will continue, given the deep animosity felt by many young Muslims in the South towards Thai security forces.

¶5. (C) Waeda-o Harai, a respected local journalist, blamed Thaksin administration bungling for increasing violence in the region. He said the government has steadfastly ignored sensible local solutions while focusing on a security-based approach. He opined that the heavy RTG security presence is increasing the local populace's estrangement from the government. Chaiyong Manerrungsakul, Chairman of the Southern Thailand Journalist Association, agreed that the RTG's "security first" approach was fueling the violence. Chaiyong said that the imposition of martial law in particular is increasing local resentment of the central government.

¶6. (C) Dr. Ibrahim said the number of actual militants committed to violence in the South is very small. Ibrahim believes that the militants have still not been able to

convince the general population to support them. However, government abuses under martial law reinforce feelings of "injustice" widely felt by local Muslims, opening them to greater sympathy towards the radicals (reftel E). Ibrahim said economic factors are not behind the violence (reftel B).

He noted that southern Thailand, unlike other areas of the world experiencing intra-communal strife, does not have problems with limited natural resources, widespread unemployment or hunger. At the heart of resentment is the local population's deeply felt feeling of "injustice" by the central government.

LUKEWARM ENDORSEMENT OF THE NRC

¶17. (C) Januzzi and poloff found most local observers cautiously optimistic about the likely success of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) (reftel A). The journalist Waeda-o said that many people in the south were hopeful about the NRC, but are concerned that local Muslims are underrepresented. The Narathiwat Islamic Committee (NIC) members approved of the NRC's mission (NOTE: Abduraman Abdulsamad, the NIC Chairman, was selected as an NRC member) and are hopeful that the commission will develop effective strategies. The NIC also believes, however, that southern Muslims are underrepresented on the commission. The journalist Paret is not optimistic about the success of Anand Panyarachun's NRC, even with the respected former prime minister at its helm. He noted that many studies on the south have been commissioned in the past but recommendations have never been implemented by the government.

BUDDHIST AND MUSLIM RELATIONS -- GETTING WORSE

¶18. (C) Staffdel Januzzi heard concerns reported in past Embassy visits to the far South (reftels C,D,E) that relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities are deteriorating. NIC members acknowledged that relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities were not as good as they were in the past. They blamed government security forces for increasing divisions between the communities by acting as if they were on the ground only to protect Buddhists.

¶19. (C) The journalists Paret and Chaiyong reported that they continue to hear steady anecdotal reports of ethnic Chinese-Thai and Buddhist-Thais leaving the south. Chaiyong noted that many non-Muslim families were using the current break in school terms to remove their children from schools in the three southernmost provinces. Chaiyong said that the top non-Islamic primary school in Narathiwat province only had 16 student enrolled for the next term.

HOW CAN THE U.S. HELP? -- BY NOT HELPING

¶10. (C) Staffdel Januzzi inquired about possible assistance the U.S. government could provide to help resolve the situation in southern Thailand, and was repeatedly told that most forms of U.S. assistance would be counterproductive. The journalist Paret noted the strong and widely held belief in the South that the U.S. was somehow fomenting the violence for its own ends (reftels). Paret said that any U.S. assistance, no matter how benign, would reinforce the rumors of U.S. involvement.

¶11. (C) Prasit Meksawan, Secretary-General of the Teachers Confederation of Southern Thailand, and a member of the NRC, echoed these concerns. He suggested that the best way the U.S. can help in the south is by maintaining our distance. He suggested that the way the U.S. can build credibility with southern Muslims is by continuing to challenge the Thaksin government publicly over egregious human rights abuses. He noted that Muslims in the South were greatly appreciative of the latest U.S. Human Rights Report (HRR) which "bravely" addressed recent abuses by the RTG. He suggested that the U.S. translate the HRR into the local "Yawi" dialect to allow for widespread dissemination.

¶12. (U) Staffdel Januzzi did not have an opportunity to clear this message.

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